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# THE MONIST

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## TRAGEDY AND THE ENJOYMENT OF IT.

HOW is it that we can take a refined pleasure in the mimic representation of scenes that would make us faint with horror if we saw them off the stage? What is the psychological basis and the ancient history of this curious phenomenon?

If you go to Aristotle, as men have been doing for more than two thousand years, with the question, What is tragedy? you will find him basing his famous definition on a highly-developed art-form, the early stages of which were largely hidden from him and are almost entirely hidden from us. Aristotle thought that tragedy, like other kinds of poetry, depended on two fundamental propensities of human nature, namely, the love of imitation and the love of "harmony" (we should rather say rhythm). But we of to-day, who have learned to operate in imagination with a long lapse of ages during which the *genus homo* was slowly acquiring the characters we find him fitted out with when we first make his acquaintance in historical records,—we of to-day are not at all certain that the love of imitation and the love of rhythm are primitive instincts of human nature. Very certainly they are less primitive than, say, the instinct of self-preservation or the instinct of reproduction. Nevertheless, our modern study of savages and of childhood, in which race experience to some extent repeats itself, makes it quite certain that the love of imitation, with a concomitant pleasure in the successful-

ness of the imitation, is a universal and a very ancient development. Somewhat later, one may guess, came the love of rhythm, which seems to have grown out of the primitive dance. I use the word "dance," for lack of a better, to cover any sort of common activity in which a number of persons move their bodies or their limbs together and try to keep time with one another.<sup>1</sup> But while the love of rhythm would seem to be a comparatively late acquisition, it is nevertheless very ancient and well-nigh universal.

But is rhythm essential to tragedy? For Aristotle it certainly was. A tragic drama in prose would have been for him a contradiction in terms—much like an opera without music for us. We, however, are very familiar with the idea of tragedies in prose, albeit we recognize that the greatest tragedies have always been written in verse. It must be said, then, that from our point of view measured language is not altogether essential to the notion of tragedy. On the other hand, for us as for Aristotle, no tragedy is thinkable as a form of art without imitation.

What, then, is the real essence of the thing? If we take Aristotle's celebrated definition and omit what he says about measured language, and if we also omit a qualifying clause which merely affirms something about which there is no room for debate, namely, that the imitation must take the form of action rather than narrative,—we have the following remainder (I quote from Butcher's

<sup>1</sup> In his new book on Euripides, page 227, Prof. Gilbert Murray speaks thus of the primitive dance: "The ancient dance was not, like our ballets, rooted in sexual emotion. It was religious: it was a form of prayer. It consisted in the use of the whole body, every limb and every muscle, to express somehow that overflow of emotion for which a man has no words. And primitive man had less command of words than we have. When the men were away on the warpath, the women prayed for them with all their bodies. They danced for the men's safe return. When the tribe's land was parched for lack of rain the tribesmen danced for the rain to come. The dance did not necessarily imply movement. It might consist in simply maintaining the same rigid attitude, as when Moses held out his arms during the battle with the Amalekites, or Ahure in the Egyptian story waited kneeling and fasting for Nefrekepta's return."

well-known translation of the *Poetics*, Chapter 6): "Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude. . . . through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions."

In the main this language is perfectly clear. A tragedy—so Aristotle thought—must be "serious," provocative of grave thought and feeling. It must have "a certain magnitude," that is, it must not be too brief, and it must not be trivial. Again, it must be "complete"; that is, it must have a beginning, a middle and an end, and the end must be a real finality, so far as the principal personage is concerned. Finally, the purpose of the imitation is to arouse the emotions of "pity" and "fear" and to effect the "purgation" of these emotions. Just exactly what Aristotle meant by his far-famed *kátharsis*, or purgation, is a very stale moot-question, which fortunately does not need to be considered here. I have dwelt a little on Aristotle's formula simply that I might bring out this fact: That in the earliest type of tragedy known to us—one, moreover, which has had great influence on modern developments—the essence of the art consisted in the *formal enactment of suffering and calamity*. This would appear to be the simplest, most fundamental account of the matter at which it is possible to arrive.

But if tragedy in its ultimate essence is the enactment of suffering and calamity, then the question arises, How is it that we can take pleasure at all in painful representations? This *crux* has had, on the whole, rather too little attention from the esthetic philosophers. Schiller indeed saw its importance at the very beginning of his studies in esthetic theory and dealt with the subject in a paper entitled *Ueber den Grund des Vergnügens an tragischen Gegenständen*, that is, the basis of our pleasure in tragic themes. But Schiller, here as in his other philosophic writings, presupposes a highly developed humanity. He

has in mind an audience imbued with something of his own ethical idealism; possessed by a feeling for moral heroism, for noble and sublime conduct, for the beauty of self-sacrifice. It is, however, indubitable that the human propensity to find pleasure in painful representations is not a product of advanced culture and has little to do with moral philosophy. It is something far older and more fundamental. It is, in fact, an inheritance from a very remote past, when our forbears took pleasure not only in the fictitious enactment of suffering, but also in the actual infliction of it before their face and eyes. Our problem is one of primitive psychology, in other words, of anthropology; and it is from the anthropologists that we get our best light on the subject. This was recognized by Wilhelm Scherer, when he wrote his *Poetik*—a book which is full of good things about the beginnings of poetry.

Scherer thought that poetry in its first rude beginnings was always a manifestation of joy. He came to the conclusion that it originated partly in the natural expression of pleasant emotions—dance and song having evolved out of leaping, shouting and wooing—and partly in the anticipatory and therefore symbolic performance of pleasant acts. A species of primitive poetry would thus be represented for us, according to this view, by the small boy riding a stick and so anticipating the future pleasure of equestrianism; or by the little girl playing with her doll and so anticipating the coming delight of motherhood. The youngsters know very well that the cane is not a horse, and the bag of sawdust not a baby; but they delight in the exercise of the imagination and in the symbolic performance of the acts which strengthen their pleasant self-deception and make it plausible. Scherer was further of the opinion that poetry, having thus become permanently associated with pleasant feelings and pleasant actions, came to be employed, by transference, in the expression of feelings

and the representation of actions which were in themselves unpleasant, but became pleasant by association. He discusses at some length the ways and means by which this *might* have happened; enough to say that it is very acute and suggestive. I doubt, however, whether Scherer is right in his chronology. It seems to me on the whole more probable that from the beginning, that is, as far back as there was any poetry at all, or any acting of symbolic scenes the paradox of pleasure in pain was already an every-day affair. To be sure, the words pleasure and pain, as used in this connection, do not exactly hit the mark, since pain is apt to suggest something from which one must necessarily shrink. But there is a kind of pleasure which consists in the mere putting forth of energy, in the mere exercise of the faculties. Such exercise seems to be a part of that instinctive love of life which is a biologic necessity and the fundamental law of our being; for a race that did not love life and dread death would long ago have become extinct. But what is it to live? Physically it is to move, psychically it is to feel, imagine and think—feeling and imagination being the more fundamental. Not without reason do we say of a person who has never felt much and has no imagination that he has never truly lived. Just as the child has a certain pleasure in moving, in using its muscles and its voice, so it has pleasure in exercising the psychic functions; in feeling strongly and expressing its feeling, in satisfying curiosity and imagining and representing that which is not. Now in seeking this pleasure which consists in the mere putting forth of psychic energy we by no means go in search of the so-called pleasant things. On the contrary, we are apt to prefer things that are painful, gruesome, dangerous; for these give the greater shock, that is, the more of that emotional excitement which is life. We

are too apt to think of pleasure and pain as if they were distinct, antipodal and mutually exclusive.

Do I seem to be straying into the blue mists? Let me elucidate the matter with an illustration which at any rate shall not be misty. Imagine yourself at a baseball game. A man is running home from third base. At the distance of ten feet from the plate he hurls himself headlong to the ground, slides in on his belly, and touches the plate just as the ball reaches the hands of the catcher, which are too high to reach him. The runner gets up with face bleeding, with his mouth full of sand and gravel, and with his wrist badly sprained. Is it pleasure or pain? That depends on the point of view. To an elderly and inert philosopher in the grand-stand it will probably seem a very good example of pain. To the kid watching the game from the bleachers it will be an epitome of all that is glorious in life. As for the runner himself, the experience will probably take on for the moment a mixed aspect; but after a day or two, especially if his run has won the game and filled the newspapers with his renown, it will become an altogether pleasurable memory.

In our boyish sports we by no means prefer to occupy our imaginations with things sweet and nice—with candy and pop and Sunday-school rewards of merit; instead of that we like to provide ourselves with make-believe deadly weapons to shoot and kill one another, or we fight with savage beasts and ferocious men. A little girl, playing with her doll, may let the doll die, and may then celebrate its funeral, if she happen to have seen one, taking a solemn delight in providing satisfactory obsequies. Of such illustrations there is no end. One might also adduce the universal interest taken in gruesome ghost-stories and tales of horror, or the fascination of brutal sports, accidents, executions, morgues, battles, and so forth.

Now for our remote forbears, as death was the great

disaster, the supreme object of dread, so it was the most powerful of magnets for the imagination. That emotional excitement which was life was to be had pre-eminently in thinking about death; in dwelling mentally on the dangers that might lead up to it, the heroism of defying it, the rewards that might follow it. We must suppose too that such exercise of the imaginative faculty made for alertness and resourcefulness in time of danger, and so contributed to the sum total of life-preserving agency. A race imaginatively indifferent to death would have stood but a poor chance in the ancient battle of life.

Such I believe to be the general anthropologic basis of our interest in tragic themes. It is of course mainly a matter of speculation. We can really *know* nothing about it, because such glimmerings of fact as we get, on which to base an opinion, are as it were of the day before yesterday. Fifty thousand years ago, for aught we know, there may have been mimicry, accompanied by song and dance and words. If so, there were the elements of drama. But nothing shows conclusively that gay elements preceded the grave, or that solemn mimicry is younger than mirthful. We do not know how many millenniums may have swept by before the rustic festival of the Attic wine-god Dionysus developed, in a favored corner of the earth, into that stately and impressive art-form that we call Greek tragedy.

The early stages of the evolution are known to us but dimly. At the end of autumn, when the wine was first tasted, the so-called rural Dionysia were held throughout Attica. The favorite sport was the *askólia*, which consisted in dancing on one leg on greased bags of inflated goatskin. "There were singing processions of the tribesmen to the altars of the god, where goats were sacrificed."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Quoted from G. C. W. Warr, *The Oresteia of Æschylus*, page xx. Sir Gilbert Murray, in the fascinating book on Euripides previously referred to, page 179, thus describes what he calls the "ancient rite" of Dionysus: "The dæmon



The song itself, at first a wild orgiastic affair, with the singers half or wholly drunk, was called a "dithyramb." In the course of time singers were masked as "satyrs," that is, they wore goat-skins and tails; *satyroi* being the name of the ancient goat-like demons of the field and forest, who were thought of as belonging to the household of Dionysus. Thus the dithyramb acquired the name of *tragōdia*, or goat-song. Presently a leader was found necessary for the proper regulation of the music and dancing. Then a responsive or dialogue element was introduced, the leader discoursing with his chorus in measured speech. Then the poet-leader became a real actor, who personated different characters by changing his mask. While he was out of sight, changing his mask, the chorus, under a new leader, took up the time with choral songs which commented on the action.

We know that by the time of Pisistratus these rustic festivals had become so popular that that enlightened tyrant brought them to the city and made them a public charge. Henceforth "goat-songs" were performed with great splendor at the city Dionysia in the spring. Æschylus introduced a second actor, Sophocles a third; and this small cast of actors was able, by change of mask during the performance, to represent all the characters needed for a somewhat elaborate action. Just how it came about that the main performance presently lost touch in a great degree—never entirely—with the riotous cult of the wine-god, we do not precisely know. It is an open field for speculation. At any rate that which had been a rustic orgy quickly evolved into a national dramatic festival in which all Hellas took an interest.

The enormous prestige of Greek tragedy, as the most im-

must have his enemy who is like himself; then we must have the contest, the tearing asunder, the messenger, the lamentation mixed with joy-cries, the discovery of the scattered members—and by a sort of doubling the discovery of the true God—and the epiphany of the dæmon in glory."

pressive artistic fact in the life of the most artistic people that ever lived, has so bewitched the modern imagination since the Renaissance that we easily overlook the essential ugliness of the raw material out of which Æschylus, Sophocles and Euripides built up their stately illusions. The *Stoff* of a Greek tragedy is nearly always a tale of revolting crime and horrible expiation. Nearly one-half of all the extant dramas relate to the loathsome history of two royal lines, that of Pelops and that of Labdacus. And what a chamber of horrors it is into which we are ushered! Tantalus, the son of Zeus, kills his son Pelops, boils the body and serves it up as a feast for the gods. Restored to life, Pelops wantonly kills the charioteer Myrtilus, who had helped him by fraud to win a kingdom, Atreus, son of Pelops, kills the children of his brother Thyestes and gives them to his father to eat. Agamemnon, son of Atreus, is killed by his faithless wife Clytemnestra, who in turn is murdered by her son Orestes. Such is the order of facts which occupied the imagination of Æschylus when he wrote his magnificent trilogy.

Again, King Laius of Thebes is warned by an oracle that he will die at the hands of his own son. To defeat the oracle he exposes the infant Œdipus to death; but the child is saved, grows up to manhood, slays his father unwittingly, marries his mother Jocasta, and has by her two daughters and two sons, the latter of whom kill each other in battle. The horrified mother hangs herself. Œdipus puts out his own eyes and wanders about in helpless misery.—This revolting story underlies the three greatest plays of Sophocles. It is true that in a few plays there is no element of loathsome horror. But they are inferior in poetic power as in dramatic interest. The greatest Greek plays are visualized tales of abominable crime and its consequences, or else of excruciating agony.

But after all, that which interested the Greek poet and

the Greek spectator was not so much the visible horror and the visible agony as the relation of crime and suffering to the moral government of the world. How can such things happen if there be gods who rule the world wisely and well? The central problem of the great Oresteian trilogy is simply this: If a son kill his mother because she has killed his father after dishonoring his bed, shall that son be justified of the higher powers or not? Æschylus answers in the affirmative. As is well known, the mind of Sophocles was ever turning on the ethical bearings of his theme. And what wonder if he accepted the idea of an over-ruling *moira* or fate, to which the gods themselves were subject—a mysterious destiny which must work itself out, even if sometimes, as in the case of Œdipus, the man himself was conscious of no wrong-doing.

The peculiar type of performance which the Greeks developed out of their Dionysia has not only furnished the modern world with its customary name for the serious drama, but has had an important share in fixing the mental associations of the word "tragedy." In their miscellaneous borrowing of things Greek the Romans never really borrowed Greek tragedy, but they did develop a literary interest in it. This interest appears in the tragedies of Seneca, for whom the essence of the matter seems to have been the excitement of nerve-thrilling horror. He borrows the staple Greek themes of fiendish crime and awful retribution, and his characters express themselves in pompous rant. It should be remembered that Seneca lived in an age when monstrous murders were very common in high circles, and that he held suicide to be the noblest mode of self-rescue from an intolerable situation.

It is now well understood that the real parent of the modern drama, which sprang up in the wake of the Renaissance, first in Spain, then in England, then in France, was the medieval popular drama which had existed in the

various forms of mystery, miracle-play, morality, chronicle play and shrovetide farce. But in the latter stages of the slow and gradual process whereby an artistic drama of literary importance evolved out of these crude medieval forms, the classical tradition came in as an influence making for compactness, dignity and concentration. It was weakest in Spain, strongest in France. Nowhere, however, was what we call the classical tradition a body of ideas deriving directly from the Greeks. The ideas came rather from the humanists, who harked back to Roman literature. It was not the peerless playwright Sophocles, but the ranting horror-monger Seneca who represented for the humanists the perfection of the tragic art as practised by the idolized ancients.

It was partly for this reason that the new tragedy became in the main a tragedy of blood and vengeance. Of course this was not the only reason. By virtue of his evolution man is a fighting and blood-letting animal. We may wish it were not so, but the fact remains. For mankind taken by and large nothing is so interesting as a spectacle of fierce passion leading up to bloodshed. In looking at such a spectacle, in vividly realizing its details, in thinking about it, they get that emotional excitement which is life, and which is, at the same time, the ultimate ground of the universal passion for mimic representations. No wonder, then, when the early English playwrights began to make plays for people who had paid their money to see a show; when the main purpose was no longer to better morals or to build men up in the religious life, but to provide emotional excitement, so that people would come again and bring their friends and swell the receipts—no wonder that the early playwrights saw the advantage of providing plenty of murder. This much they hardly needed to learn from abroad. But some of them were young scholars fresh from the university, who found in play-writ-

ing the shortest road to livelihood and fame. For such men it was natural to eke out their own supply of atrocities by drawing on the supply of antiquity, and especially to take hints from the great horror-monger Seneca.

In the hands of Shakespeare, as all the world knows, the tragedy of blood and vengeance speedily developed into an incomparable art-form which, like that of Sophocles, marks a new culminating-point in the history of dramatic achievement. And is it not a little singular, when one pauses to think of it, that all the wealth of thought and the imaginative splendor which we admire in the Shakespearian tragedy should have been largely called into being by the contemplation of murder and vengeance? That the noblest of all our literary forms should be thus deeply rooted in the subsoil of man's inhumanity to man?

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